DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 282 CS 504 607

AUTHOR Short, Brant; Seeger, Matthew
TITLE Mentoring and Organizational Communication: A Review of the Research.
PUB DATE Jun 84
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Chicago, IL, April 12-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Administration; *Business Communication; Career Guidance; Communication Research; *Interpersonal Relationship; Management Development; *Mentors; *Modeling (Psychology); *Professional Development

ABSTRACT

From the perspective of organizational behavior, mentoring received little attention until the mid 1970s. Since that time, the topic has been praised, criticized, analyzed, and in some organizations formally endorsed. A survey of 1,200 leading corporate executives found that two thirds of those surveyed had a mentor, that the number of these relationships is growing, and that those who have had them earn more money at a younger age and are happier with their career progress than those who have not had mentors. (A mentor is someone who takes a protege and teaches him or her the basic job, shows how to cope with an environment and encourages progress through it, and acts as a model for career or adult behavior.) This relationship exists on a one-to-one basis between a more experienced person and an inexperienced person, usually a half generation apart in age. Proteges can often attract a mentor by modeling themselves after the chosen person, talking to that person, and displaying knowledge and initiative. Mentors who wish to attract proteges usually set high examples in terms of productivity, excellence, and concern for people, in addition to having wide knowledge of the organization and industry. Mentors are helpful to women in business because they provide access to information channels that are unavailable except through grapevine-type sources. However, formalized mentor programs do not generate the warmth and spontaneity of informal relationships, and they create discord among other employees because of perceived favoritism. (CRM)

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Mentoring and Organizational Communication:

A Review of the Research

by

Brant Short
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana

and

Matthew Seeger
Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

Submitted to
Educational Resources
Information Center

June 1984

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CS 204 607

Mentoring and Organizational Communication: A Review of the Research

From the perspective of organizational behavior, mentoring received little attention until the mid 1970s. Since that time, the topic has been praised, criticized, analyzed, and in some organizations, formally endorsed. Even Garry Trudeau poked fun at mentoring in a series of Doonesbury comic strips. This essay seeks to review current literature, identify the status of mentoring in organizational relationships, and pose research questions for communication scholars.

Gerald Roche's survey of 1200 leading corporate executives provided the foundation for many recent articles on mentoring. Roche (1979: 14) found that two-thirds of those surveyed had a mentor, "that the number of these relationships is growing, and that those who have had them earn more money at a younger age and are happier with their career progress." It is little wonder, therefore, that the majority of articles reviewed cite Roche's findings. A second reason for the increasing concern with mentoring is a significant shift in management philosophy. Dr. C. Edward Weber (1980: 19) contends that executives are one of the few abundant resources available to the modern business. "Executive intensity," writes Weber, "may allow businesses to return to the decentralization it knew before the growth of large-scale enterprises, and to make up for losses in productivity and technology." As such, mentoring may help organizations bridge the gaps caused by expensive energy, scarce natural resources, and diffuse technology.

Because of such conclusions, mentoring clearly deserves increased scholarly attention. Although considered informal communication, mentoring also relies upon a well-developed system of upward and downward communication, especially during the initial phases of the relationship. The topic presents a fresh slate of questions for communication scholars and will certainly stimulate further study as researchers examine organizations more carefully.

Definitions of Mentoring

Defining the term "mentor" is vital for a worthwhile examination of the topic. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1973) defines a mentor as a "trusted counselor or guide," while T. J. Hatlin (1981: 36) characterizes the mentor as "a teacher who is also a friend." Adding a chronological dimension to the relationship, Weber (Johnson, 1981: 55) views the "mentor as a senior person who undertakes to guide a younger person's development, both personal and career." Some writers perceive a distinction between a sponsor and a mentor. Helen McLane (1981: 38), for example, suggests, "A sponsor possesses the power to bring about job enrichment, promotion or other goals sought near-term for career advancement. A mentor, on the other hand, may not even be positioned to recommend someone for a new job." From McLane's vantage, the sponsor's promotional power, although helpful, is not necessary for successful mentoring.

Other writers have defined the concept functionally. In Roche's suvey, executives were asked: "At any stage of your career, have you had a relationship with a person who took a personal interest in your career and who guided or sponsored you?"

Although Roche's question is so broad that it may not account for the intimate, long-term relationship implied by other definitions, business scholars have not questioned the implications of the definition. In an effort toward greater precision, Audrey Collin (1979: 12) examined various empirical studies of human behavior in the organization and concluded that the protege needs a mentor to do the following:

1. To teach him his basic job.
2. To show him how to cope with his environment and to encourage his progress through it (through the formal and informal hierarchy of the company or through life generally).
3. To act as a model (for his career or adult behavior).

"By definition," Collin continues, "the role exists only as a one to one relationship between a more experieneced person and an inexperienced person."

Yale psychologist Daniel Levinson also views mentoring in terms of function. "Mentoring is defined not in terms of formal roles," writes Levinson (1978: 98), "but in terms of the character of the relationship and the function it serves." From his research, Levinson found that mentors can fill the following roles: teacher, sponsor, host and guide, and counsel. However Levinson (1978: 99) finds another function in the relationship which is "developmentally the most crucial one: to support and facilitate the realization of the Dream." The mentor "fosters the young adult's development by believing in him, sharing the youthful Dream and giving it his blessing, helping to define the newly emerging self in it newly discovered world, and creating space in which the young man can work on a reasonably satisfactory life structure that contains the dream."

Hence moving from the basic to the more complex perspectives, the concept of mentoring seems modified by each author to fit the special needs of the particular study. From our reading, the following definition is broad enought to encompass various mentoring situations while specific enough for empirical observation: A mentor is usually an older and more experienced person who helps an individual develop personal and/or career goals by serving as a guide, teacher, and role model in an informal, one-to-one relationship.

The Mentoring Process

In light of current research the manner in which a new employee obtains a mentor is debatable. The Woodlands Group (1980: 920) argues that many "effective mentors are self-appointed." Jane Bensahel (1977: 44) agrees but adds that the mentor's decision to pursue the relationship is usually not formalized. "But more frequently," she writes, "the leader's hopes for the younger manager are not translated into such definite plans. Rather the top executive simply takes pains to provide openings, opportunities to learn and useful contacts for the protege." In an effort to obtain a mentor, Johnson (1981: 57) believes the protege has two alternatives: "Model yourself after another person. Talk to that person as often as possible and use his/her knowledge. Make yourself visible to your model and he/she may respond favorably." The second option, according to Johnson, is to simply "ask someone to be your mentor. The worst that can happen is they will say no."

Some writers believe that the protege must take the first step in establishing a mentoring relationship. McLane (1981: 39) contends

that directness is the best way to approach a possible mentor: "Don't hesitate to be direct; a mentor will appreciate a declared recognition of his or her ability to impart worthwhile information." Such an approach, McLane continues, will allow the potential mentor to suggest other alternatives if he or she feels unable to participate in such a relationship.

Weber (1980: 22) notes that most invitations to a mentoring relationship are "implied by the interest of the other person." The interest and visibility allows both parties to evaluate the possibility of establishing a closer working arrangement. The direct approach also helps to eliminate possible misunderstandings. According to Weber, "An unstated invitation requires that the protege conjectures the mentor's purpose--and it is not surprising that differing expectations can arise." Taking the overt invitation one step further, Weber advocates that expectations ought to be "mutual and explicit" for both parties before the relationship begins. This practice will "remind mentors of their obligations" and not allow the relationship to exist as an extended friendship at the work place.

Although definitions of mentoring suggest specific behaviors by the mentor, recent articles identify a variety of personality characteristics associated with effective mentors. Hatlin (1981: 38) offers seven guidelines for the supervisor who desires to establish a mentoring relationship with subordinates:

1. Be the best. Set an example for high productivity, excellence, and concern for people.
2. Know the organization--goals, objectives, and structures.
3. Know the industry--developments, trends, etc.
4. Know the people--a favorable match with the protege.

5. Be in tune with the times--be aware of current practices.

6. Offer encouragement.

7. Devote time to the relationship--formal and informal contact.

Interestingly, Hatlin suggests the individual competence of the mentor is more important than the ability of the protege in the formation of the relationship.

Weber (1980: 21) writes, "Effective mentors possess mature and integrated personalities." He contends that specific traits of the effective mentor are hard decision-making, assertiveness and dominance, independence and seriousness. Successful mentors, however, must have"another side to their personalities which allows them to be gentle, hopeful, and accepting of the protege's uniqueness."

The Woodlands Group (1980: 920) suggests several pragmatic concerns for the mentor. "Mentors must possess a wide knowledge of the organization--especially the informal structures and processes." The mentor who lacks a basic understanding of the powerful informal networks in the organization may offer weak and misleading advice and ultimately undermine his or her credibility as a mentor. The Woodlands Group also believes that "genuine generosity, compassion, and concern" are required for effective mentoring. Mentors must be good listeners, "hearing feelings as well as ideas." Confirming such conclusions, Roche (1979: 21) found that a mentor's "willingness to share knowledge and understanding" received "by far" the highest value among all respondants in the national survey. For those executives who reported having a mentor, "sharing and counseling traits" were given a higher relative value than among those executives that did not benefit

from having a mentor. Other characteristics ranked high by the executives were "knowledge of the organization and the people in it, a mentor's rank, respect from peers in the organization, and knowledge of the use of power."

Levinson (1978: 99) contends that the mentor is ideally a half generation older than the protege, "roughly 8 to 15 years." When the mentor is older by a generation, "there is a greater risk that the relationship will be symbolized by both in parent-child terms." If the age difference is too close, "the two are likely to experience each other as peers." Although Levinson admits there can be exceptions to this rule, he argues that age is an important variable in any mentoring relationship.

Although not much has been written about the various stages of mentoring, it seems that the relationship must inherently progress from a beginning to a conclusion. By nature of the relationship, the protege ought to reach a stage in which he or she no longer needs a mentor's guiding hand. This stage does not mean the termination of the relationship but rather a period of redefining roles. Levinson (1978: 100) views the mentor as a transitional figure leading the inexperienced executive from a childhood level to an adult status in the organizational culture. Levinson concludes:

> As the relationship evolves, /the protege/ gains a fuller sense of his own authority and his capability for autonomous, responsible action. The balance of giving/receiving becomes more equal. The younger man increasingly has the experience of "I am" as an adult, and their relationship becomes more mutual. This shift serves a crucial developmental function for the younger man: it is part of the process by which he transcends the father-son, man-boy division of his childhood.

Significantly, Levinson finds that the protege experiences negative

feelings for the mentor. Respect, appreciation, gratitude and love are natural; yet, resentment, inferiority, envy, and intimidation are also experienced by the protege simultaneously with the strong positive feelings. Levinson contends, "Mentoring is best understood as a form of love relationship."

The relationship can last two or three years, which is the average duration, or up to eight to ten years in some cases. It can end naturally when one person departs or it can slowly "cool down" as the protege loses the need for mentoring. "Most often," writes Levinson (1978: 100), "an intense mentor relationship ends with a strong conflict and bad feelings on both sides. The young man may have powerful feelings of bitterness, rancor, grief, abandonment, liberation, and rejuvanation." The significance of the mentoring, however, is not lost. In Levinson's words, the value of the relationship may be fully realized "after the termination" of the actual relationship.

On the other hand, Roche's (1979: 24) study tends to contradict Levinson's conclusions: "Mentor relationships in the business world seem to develop into lengthy friendships." Nearly half of Roche's respondents still had a relationship with <u>all</u> their mentors, a quarter had a relationship with at least one mentor, and only a quarter had no relationship with a former mentor. In terms of the actual quality of the relationship between former mentor and protege, Roche found that 60 percent characterized the relationship as "friendly" and that 30 percent termed the relationship as "close." Roche concludes that Levinson may have examined highly intense relationships which may account for the contradictory findings.

Overall, no single work analyzes the step-by-step process by which a new manager finds a mentor, develops a strong relationship, and finally, terminates the arrangement. Through the survey method Roche and Levinson come closest.

Risks and Benefits

Many articles detail possible risks and benefits to mentors, Because the advantages for the protege seem self-evident, little is generally written about the protege in terms of risks and benefits. As Roche's survey found, the proteges were happier and made more money later in their career than the executives who were not mentored. Some writers, however, list additional benefits for the protege. McLane (1981: 39) believes that a mentor "adds to the protege's stature within the organization...If the mentor is well-regarded, his stamp of approval will influence the thinking of others who may be equally if not more important to the protege's success." Weber (1980: 22) argues that mentors allow the protege to "gain self-confidence and the courage to expand their horizons."

On the other hand, there seem to be few risks for the protege. The Woodlands Group (1980: 920) warns: "Proteges face possible consequences too, bad advice may hurt career and emotional poise; dependencies are established." Other than this brief point, the hazzards to the protege are generally untouched in the research.

Mentors face two major risk areas--professional and emotional. For example, Hatlin (1981: 38) points out that competition between mentors can polarize an organization: "Instead of supporting organizational goals, a mentor can use the relationship to demonstrate personal power by supporting as a show of force a particular

person who is not worthy or qualified for a position. Where political alliances within an organization are important for advancement, the mentors may be used as political pawns." The emotional risk to the mentor is summed up by the Woodlands Group (1980: 920): "The mentor may care as the parent cares; mentors thus risk disappointment, failure, rejection. The protege is in control of the relationship...There is considerable risk for the mentor: the risk of being wrong in counsel or in selection of protege, the risk of rejection."

The benefits to the mentor are more intangible and difficult to list simply because the mentor receives no status or economic rewards in the process. In fact, considering the time and emotional concern that a mentor must invest in a relationship, one may wonder why anyone would cultivate such an arrangement. According to Robert Stone (Edson, 1980: 19), director of corporate communications at McGraw-Edison, managers "gain something from mentoring relationships becuase they get the value of fresh thinking, and they are sometimes challenged by the beginners they take under their wings." Weber (1980: 22) finds that "friendship and even love can be the outcome of some mentoring situations." More specifically, Weber believes the relationship allows the mentor to develop fresh ideas. He contends that executives must be publicly perceived as "prudent"" and "incisive" managers; hence, they cannot "simply play with ideas." "Discussions with proteges," writes Weber, "provide risk-free opportunities to explore ideas and alternatives, and thus help mentors sharpen their own thinking, skills, and ideas."

The need to become a mentor reaches beyond simply polishing up

individual thinking skills. Levinson (1978: 253) believes significant psychological needs are fulfilled by mentoring: "There is a measure of altruism in mentoring--a sense of meeting an obligation of doing something for another being. But much more than altruism is involved: the mentor is doing something for himself." He uses his knowledge productively by sharing it with others and continues to learn by "maintaining his connection with the forces of youthful energy in the world and himself. He needs the recipient of mentoring as much as the recipient needs him."

Levinson (1978: 254) points to the work of Erik Erikson to illustrate the natural need among humans to mentor younger individuals. Erikson found that in middle adulthood a man "forms a growing awareness of the continuity of human life and the flow of generations. He feels a concern for the upcoming generations of young adults." Hence, the mentor's reward may be fulfillment of a subconcious, albeit powerful, psychological need.

Mentoring and Socialization

The relationship between mentoring and socialization of organizational values has received little attention from scholars. A well-respected role model obviously can affect a younger person's perceptions, but the degree of change caused by the mentor has not been examined. Hatlin (1981: 37) believes that one result of mentoring is a "better trained workforce. Mentors serve as trainers not just for a task but for an entire person. The whole person grows and is better prepared to serve the organization." In effect, the novice has been conditioned to serve the value structure of the organization. Weber (1980: 2) is more specific: mentoring

"conveys ideals and values through a personal relation, providing positive reinforcement through nurturing the protege, who is motivated to take on the values of the mentor." Collin's (1979: 12) research review confirms the above conclusions:

> The role of the mentor serves to match the needs of the individual with those of the organization. The mature man, as he discovers the younger man's capabilities, potentials and inclinations will lead him through the roles which are both appropriate to his apprentice and essential to the company's effective functioning. In this way, it is suggested the mentor acts as the leading edge in the process of socialization.

Is the socialization process of organizational values inherent in the mentoring relationship? Some would arge that socialization is a natural outgrowth of care and concern, not an overt plan to mold fresh minds. Indeed, some writers believe that the mentor may relegate the needs of the organization to a secondary status when the needs of the protege come into conflict. The Woodlands Group (1980: 920) concludes: "Mentors are more apt to be concerned with the needs of the protege than with the needs of the organization: they know how their services contribute, but their respect and affection for the protege takes precedence--even when it means advising one to leave the organization in order to achieve maximum growth and development."

Formalized Mentoring

The positve attention given to mentoring has led some organizations to formalize the process by assigning new managers to established executives. Sometimes called mentoring, this program is also labeled as "sponsoring." Can a formalized approach achieve the same positive results as the natural

informal, and spontaneous mentoring relationship? The literature has little to say about this question. Most research has examined the informal mentoring relationship and little of that has been empirical.

Margaret Price (1981: 72) reports that formal mentoring programs are growing and that many are aimed at minorities, women, or the so-called "fast trackers." Unfortunately, Price offers little support for such programs. Some believe that the program fosters jealousy and results in grooming "crown princes" for the company. According to the critics interviewed by Price, "formal mentoring seems too legislated to spark the needed warmth and spontaneity." One critic, Dr. Kathy Kram argues, "I don't know if you can achieve the same bonding, identification, and commitment to a mentoring relationship as when you allow it to start up spontaneously." The Woodlands Group (1980: 920) agrees: Mentors "listen in the best Rogerian sense, hearing feelings as well as ideas. An assignment system...seems incompatiable with the spirit of the process." It seems, therefore, that formalized mentoring programs have serious shortcomings. At this time it would be unfair to dismiss the potential benefits of such programs. Until studies are conducted and analyzed, the status of formalized mentoring remains unclear.

Mentoring and Women

Many articles, especially in women's magazines, have examined the topic of mentoring and women. As more women assume managerial status, there is a greater need for mentoring among women. The issue has received significant attention because the male-dominated business world has had few women available to serve as mentors.

Also because of the unique challenges facing women in business, some studies have concluded that women need mentoring more than men. Roche (1979: 24) found that women averaged three mentors in a career compared to an average of two mentors for men. Roche also found that 70 percent of the women surveyed had male mentors compared to only 2 percent for a reverse situation, female mentor/male protege.

Surveys have established that women in business need mentoring. Dr. Linda Phillips-Jones (1982: 136) surveyed 150 "notably successful" women and found that two-thirds reported having a mentor while Weber (1980: 18) reports that "a study of Business Week's top 100 businesswomen...concluded that 'All of the highest-ranking women in the country have had a mentor.'"

A fundamental problem for the novice female executive is finding another woman to serve as her mentor. Besides the scarcity of women executives, some women at high levels have problems serving as mentors. Levinson (1978: 98) notes, "The few women who might serve as mentors are often too beset by the stresses of survival in a work world dominated by men to provide good mentoring for young women."

Some writers argue that a mentor is more important for a woman's career than a man's because of the great difficulties that face women in business. In a study of 30 female managers, Fitt and Newton (1981: 60) found several special concerns for the novice woman in the organization. They note that a major function of the mentors is to give the woman a sense of "legitimacy" as a future leader in the business. One mentor told the authors: "Women are not given the benefit of the doubt. The risks in making a mistake are always higher for women." Fitt and Newton also found

that the lack of female role models in the organization made finding a mentor essential for the new woman.

Mentors also provide women with access to valuable information that is often restricted to an informal male-dominated grapevine. "A common complaint of business women," writes McLane (1981: 39), "is lack of access to the information pipeline which extends for men to the luncheon club, after-five pub, the 'good old boy' and golf course."

The obvious risk for the female protege is the rumor of a sexual relationship with a male mentor. Fitt and Newton (1981:60) found that women are generally not concerned with the "inevitable" rumors in the company grapevine. "Many women in the survey," write the authors, "said it is their responsibility to behave professionally and learn to cope with any tensions or rumors."

Not everyone is pleased with the male domination of mentoring. Louise Kelley (1982: 40) argues, "For women, mentors can be harmful to health and career." Kelley contends that men can never understand the problems facing women in the business world and that some mentors may actually inhibit the intellectual growth of the protege. More important, the "mentor myth" only serves to perpetuate the protection dream for women that someone is needed to take care of them. Kelley concludes: "In short, a mentor is no answer. Success comes from talent, timing, hard work and luck. All of that (not a man) is behind every great woman." Kelley stands alone in her absolute rejection of mentoring for the contemporary woman in business.

Summary

Communication offers a valuable method of understanding the mentoring process. For example, The Woodlands Group (1981: 920) offers two suggestions to stimulate mentoring in the organization that focus upon communication:

> First, the consequences must be altered to reward those who perform these roles well. Managers who sponsor and act as mentors must be rewarded with recognition in appraisals and with those perquisites which emphatic bosses know the individuals value.
>
> [Second] consciously and conspicuously discuss the need for the roles and the cases where each role is being well-played. This means, in part, an open recognition that the roles are being executed; it means a mechanism for saying thank you.

In both cases, management must react with open support of the mentoring. Hence, organizations need a strong commitment to mentoring and some means of communicating such desries to members of the organization. Weber (1980: 19) suggests a "program involving regular, periodic interaction and communication." He believes that both mentor and protege ought to know each other's expectations and immediate and long-term objectives.

Collin (1979: 13) contends that certain mentoring roles must be filled and that regardless of a formal hierarchy, the informal mentor-protege relationship will develop. To facilitate this relationship, Collin suggests that management "be aware of the role of mentor and identify those who fill it and by what means. Where this role exists only in the formal structure, management must take care not to overshadow it with it formal hierarchy." In effect, management must take pains not to hinder the development of mentoring in the organization.

Studying the mentor in the contemporary organization offers a rich area of potential research for the speech communication field. From this review of the basic journal literature available, four questions appropriate to pose in closing:

1. Can organizations facilitate mentor-protege relationships through planned communication strategies?
2. Are formalized mentor programs of any value to the organization and how does communication differ in these programs?
3. What does mentoring tell communication scholars about informal networks in the organization?
4. Does mentoring socialize organizational values and if so, can communication researchers ethically condone this as a benefit of mentoring?

Although writers in business would eagerly answer the above questions, communication scholars should reserve judgment until further work is done by organizational communication researchers.

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